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Ireland and Empire

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Many writers attribute Ireland's problems to colonialism. Most, however, make only limited reference to literature on colonialism elsewhere, and debate is hampered by the intimacy of the Irish academic and intellectual scene, which means criticism is muffled by tact or excessively personalised.

Stephen Howe summarises this literature in a survey uncompromising in praise and criticism. In his early chapters, Howe surveys the history of relations between Britain and Ireland. Employing a modernist theory of nationalism and favouring the archipelagic model of mediaeval and early modern Ireland rather than its "internal colonialist" rival, he argues that until the early modern era it is questionable how far "England" as an entity existed, or whether there was an "Ireland" to be conquered. He finds the colonial parallel more applicable to the systematic conquests and plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but of doubtful value thereafter; there was persistent ambiguity about whether Ireland was a kingdom or a colony, and even when administrators propounded a colonial agenda their ability to implement it was limited. Howe's central point is that British rule in Ireland was always limited and mediated by heterogeneous interests, rather than an omnipotent coloniser reshaping a helpless Other.

Howe notes that Irish nationalist sympathy for the victims of empire was usually selective and based on opportunistic support for Britain's enemies. (This is correct, though exceptions are more significant than Howe realises. Enlightenment-inspired United Irish leaders of the 1790s extensively compared the plight of the Irish to that of black slaves - though defeated United Irishmen who fled to the southern states of America often changed their views⁽¹⁾ R.R. Madden, mid-century historian of the United Irishmen, was an active abolitionist who gave crucial evidence in the *Amistad* trial.) Many nationalists anxiously distinguished themselves from supposedly pre-political "savages"; some were avowed racists. The Young Irelander John

Mitchel denounced British exploitation of India and celebrated Afghan defeat of the British;(2) Mitchel also advocated enslavement of blacks and declared that the crowning indignity of Britain's oppression of Ireland was its infliction upon white men (p.44; Howe is too lenient to Mitchel). Howe argues that British resistance to Home Rule reflected fear of the break-up of the United Kingdom rather than the empire, and this died away even within the Conservative Party as the twentieth century progressed. Howe qualifies this view of the Home Rule debate (perhaps it needs further qualification) and his view that Conservative Unionism died with Ian Gow is slightly exaggerated.(3) He is stronger when pointing out that most anti-colonial writers tacitly excluded Ireland from their subject, as do most historians of empire.

A chapter on Irish historians discusses the teleological nationalist historical tradition and its partial supersession by professionalised historians associated with the journal *Irish Historical Studies* and by the outspoken "revisionism" of writers like Conor Cruise O'Brien. Howe finds both insufficiently concerned with comparative perspectives and criticises the excessive positivism of the scholars, but thinks this preferable to "even more methodologically retrograde" anti-revisionists, who also assume "Irish exceptionalism" and sometimes demand an usable past irrespective of its truth.

Howe then explores popular Unionist historical consciousness, making enterprising use of ephemera such as the *Orange Standard* and *Ulster Review*. "Anti-revisionists" find counterparts in Ian Adamson and Michael Hall's attempt to base a common Ulster identity on alleged descent from the Cruthin, a pre-Celtic people. Howe correctly cites archaeologists' declarations that the Cruthin are culturally invisible. For Adamson, who admires the fantasies of C.S. Lewis (another native of North Down) the Cruthin offer escape from political and cultural frustration into a heroic past. For Hall the Cruthin, *because* of their invisibility, represent the silent ordinary people past and present; his working-class ancestors in East Belfast, the present-day populations of republican and loyalist areas where he organises "think-tanks" of community workers, publishing the results. Hall's work for reconciliation is admirable, but the myth that drives it is false.

At the heart of this book lies a polemic against writers who present colonialism in cultural terms with little or no reference to material factors, who stretch the term to cover almost any form of domination or exploitation, who base sweeping generalisations on limited and partial readings of a few literary texts. His principal targets are writers associated with the Derry-based Field Day collective. Howe complains that these writers employ sophisticated theoretical apparatus to serve a simplistic interpretation of the Irish situation, that their definitions are so wide they are meaningless, and flaws and contradictions in their arguments are glossed over by postmodernist refusal to distinguish between myth and fact and assertions that when their version of "liberatory" discourse attains universal hegemony all will be reconciled and opposition will automatically cease to exist. (This ominously resembles the Dostoevskyan provincial intellectual hoping for universal liberty but impelled by his own logic to advocate universal slavery.)

Howe complains about their failure to define colonialism, which they present as an omnipresent Cartesian demon, and their refusal to engage with Ulster Unionism, a denial of the "otherness" which they invoke. Howe takes up Francis Mulhern's point that Field Day's view of Ireland is centered on Derry and dismisses the experience of the Republic as secondary to conflict with Britain. This should not imply that Derry experience is inauthentic, though Howe should acknowledge how this nationalist/republican view of the British state in Northern Ireland as active contributor to the conflict rather than neutral and reasonable guarantor reflects security force activities in the early 1970s and the limitations of direct rule. The Derry viewpoint also influences Field Day's view of Northern Ireland; partition appears purely oppressive and irrational more easily if Derry with its lost Donegal hinterland and longstanding repression of a local Catholic majority through gerrymandering, rather than Belfast and Protestant-majority East Ulster, is taken as paradigmatic.

Not all Howe's specific criticisms here are correct. Luke Gibbons may not offer direct citations for his interpretation of Burke's celebration of tradition as congruent with postmodern multiculturalism, but it is a plausible reading, and Gibbons' emphasis on the resurgence of certain traditionalisms in 1980s Ireland can be read as a statement that modernity will not arrive automatically but must be actively created and adapted. (p.126) Nonetheless, Howe is correct to point out the drawbacks of arguments which valorise "oppositional

kinds of nationalism; decentralised, non-hierarchical, even anarchic, fragmentary and fugitive in expression, associated with peasant, proletarian, female, local and minority resistances (p.133)". Historians of agrarian violence and modern paramilitarism (loyalist and republican) show that while such "resistance" is often an embryonic form of political expression, it can also manifest as cruel, arbitrary and self-serving violence against neighbours and local rivals rather than external oppressors. Howe's reminder that for all their limitations the "conservative" founders of the southern Irish state averted the populist chaos and bloody dictatorships which consumed many newly independent states, and that victory for their "radical" opponents might have produced such horrors rather than the "liberatory" Utopia of retrospective postmodernist dreams (pp236-7), is well taken.(4) (It should be noted that in Ireland and elsewhere, centralised administration often serves as a check on predatory local vested interests.)(5)

The next chapters, on attributions of the Irish Republic's problems to neocolonial dependency and interpretations of the Northern Ireland conflict as anti-colonial, display painful examples of false prophecies and simplistic rhetoric. In the South, dependency theorists and economic nationalists explained the failure of protectionism by claiming it did not go far enough, while attributing to colonialism economic and social problems shared with most advanced industrial countries and predicting indefinite stagnation a shortly before a sustained economic boom. Many socialists in the 1970s and 1980s uncritically equated the Northern conflict with colonial wars elsewhere, even hinting Ulster Unionists should leave like Algerian colons. Some feminists presented all conservative and patriarchal elements of Irish life as colonial legacies which would vanish with IRA victory, uttering pseudo-traditionalist denunciations of feminists who disagreed.

Howe surveys Ulster Unionism, duly sceptical towards claims by "liberal unionists" like Arthur Aughey that the Britishness with which Unionists identify is inherently modern and multicultural. Howe argues that while Ulster Unionists supported the empire this was on the same terms as the rest of Britain, rather than as a separate settler community. He finds present-day Unionism fragmented, confused, often sectarian, but not a mere creation of British policy. After discussing James Loughlin's suggestion that Ulster Unionism is a British "Northern" regional identity, he favours Frank Wright's view that while the problem was shaped by the nineteenth-century decay of older colonial structures, Northern Ireland is an ethnic frontier rather than a settler colony. Howe concludes by arguing that colonialism is only part of the complex Irish experience, which has much in common with eastern and southern Europe. He appeals for transcendence of divisions through scholarly understanding and social democracy.

No survey so wide-ranging could be flawless, and reviews, like surveys, must to a large extent be reactive. Howe's details are more easily criticised than his framework. He is sometimes unduly dismissive towards individual commentators. He accuses Catherine Candy's article on the Irish-born Theosophist Margaret Cousins (1878-1954) of failing "to demonstrate that Cousins was at all involved in nationalist politics in Ireland *or* India" (p.49). Cousins' Irish political sympathies were nationalist though her main involvement was suffragist, and she was indeed active in the Indian nationalist movement.(6) Howe's criticism of Gearoid O Cruaíaoich's defence of myth is misplaced (p.144) O Cruaíaoich, a folklorist, is not presenting as myth superior to reason but pointing out that it can convey meaning.

Howe's account of nineteenth and twentieth-century Ireland too easily shades into wholesale dismissal of nationalist viewpoints. Liberalism and social democracy may resolve the Northern Ireland problem; it is still necessary to explain why, despite benefits conferred by Liberal reforms, many nineteenth-century Irish nationalists specifically repudiated liberalism as a hypocritical mask for patronage and power, why labourism failed to overcome sectarianism under Stormont. Domination and exploitation may not be colonial and still rankle; one does not have to substitute myth for reason to respect and decipher the unfamiliar and sometimes unpalatable idioms in which the maimed tried to express their situation. Mitchel's claim that the Great Famine was a premeditated act of genocide is unsustainable, and the incongruity between his advocacy of Irish liberty and African enslavement has always jarred, but his angry anti-liberal rhetoric seemed to many Irish nationalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to explain something about the condition of Ireland they experienced.

Howe's account of Arthur Griffith, founder of Sinn Féin (pp44-8, 250n1), reproduces flaws in the literature

for which I am partly responsible. Griffith's pamphlet *Pitt's Policy*, often cited as claiming Ireland should share the British Empire, tried to disprove by comparison with the actual state of affairs Unionist arguments that Ireland benefited from incorporation in the United Kingdom; it does not represent Griffith's own views. Griffith saw Mitchel's racism as irrelevant to his stature as an Irish nationalist, but did not endorse it (though he shared Mitchel's anti-Semitism); his early journalism contains impassioned denunciations of British atrocities against the Matabele (though he ignored similar atrocities by Afrikaners). Vincent Tucker's view of Griffith as prototype for Third World anti-colonial socialists (p.62) rests on the same misunderstanding as similar claims for earlier figures. Like his eighteenth and nineteenth-century precursors, Griffith believed an independent Ireland would replace British-sustained structures of privilege and patriotism by egalitarian citizenship and economic nationalism would spread prosperity. His historiographical misfortune was to clash with socialists who emphasised his faults while misunderstanding earlier figures who shared his outlook as precursors of their own⁽⁷⁾

In criticising Gibbons' claim that the national-Marxist James Connolly was influenced by economic nationalist arguments, Howe dismisses Connolly as uncritically reliant on romantic nationalist historians (p.63). This understates Connolly's originality; his *Labour in Irish History* (1910) challenges economic nationalists (anticipating modern economic historians) by arguing that pre-Union economic growth derived from the Industrial Revolution rather than the Irish Parliament, and that a non-socialist Irish state would serve the Irish bourgeoisie rather than the general interest. (The nationalist economic historian George O'Brien tried unsuccessfully to refute Connolly, fearing this "would deprive the Irish nation of one great argument in favour of the restoration of its parliamentary liberty".)⁽⁸⁾

Howe discusses the Irish Republic in terms of the failures of economic nationalism and dependency theory; more should be said about its cultural debates to explain why many southern intellectuals emphasise modernisation rather than colonialism. This gap reflects Howe's over-ready assumption that Irish nationalists were historically concerned with state power and cultural determinism is a recent development. In fact the 1880s and 1890s produced a cultural nationalism which reacted to perceived limitations of parliamentary politics by arguing that cultural self-confidence was necessary for political and economic revival, and in trying to work the British system the Irish unwittingly abandoned the sources of their strength. This drew on older critiques by Irish Tories who reacted to Irish nationalists and British reformers by posing as defenders of local pieties and opposing to universalist reformism a projected national culture reconciling all Irish classes and creeds to the status quo; a project partly co-opted by nationalist intellectuals like Davis who substituted nationalism as the basis of cultural reconciliation. (Knapp's view that Lady Gregory's primitivism reflected social conservatism as well as cultural nationalism (p.144) is less implausible than Howe suggests.)

The romantic Tory and Gaelic revivalist Standish O'Grady complained that scholarly historians ignored heroic virtues visible to the synthesising eye of the artist; this philosophy was adopted by the cultural nationalist Daniel Corkery, who attacked "scientific" history as futile sifting of colonial archives and conceived his study of the eighteenth-century Gaelic poetic tradition as a national epic of "Land, Nationalism, and Religion". (This resembles recent anti-revisionist critiques.) Some political nationalists saw culturalism as mystification distracting attention from statehood, but it was significant in the Literary Revival and the Irish-language movement and retrospectively perceived as inspiring the rebels of 1916-23. A version became the official ideology of the newly independent state, cited to justify various forms of social repression, and devastatingly attacked by consciously realist and modernist intellectuals such as Conor Cruise O'Brien. (Much twentieth-century scholarship celebrates the bureaucratic rationality of the civil service as saviour from the self-serving fantasies of political activists.) Many southern intellectuals thus accuse neo-nationalist cultural theorists of reviving a failed past, while some theorists' contortions reflect attempts to explain neo-traditionalism as externally imposed distortion of a valid project.

Howe's account of Unionism misses intriguing undercurrents. He overlooks a development which devastated Unionist self-confidence and self-perception; sections of the upper and upper-middle classes which formerly provided leadership and were associated with a "British" as distinct from "Ulster" ethos have dropped out of active political involvement (because of the erosion of the regional economic base which underpinned their power, and increasing distance between the metropolitan "Britishness" with which they identify and the

"Ulster Britishness" of traditional Unionism.) The gap has been filled by more provincial figures and emphasis on Ulster-Scots traditions associated with Presbyterianism. This provides a history of disadvantage and antiestablishment protest which fits present-day discontent and provides rhetorical counterweight to nationalist accounts of their own oppression; it is also more reminiscent of sentimental nineteenth-century "kailyard" literature than of contemporary Scotland, and weakened by withdrawal of the institutional support which mainstream Presbyterianism provided to earlier manifestations. Ulster-Scots revivalism produced the only significant bicentennial Unionist reinterpretation of the 1798 Rising, overlooked by Howe. David Hume, a local historian from Ballycarry in East Antrim (a centre of United Irish activity in 1798), active in the "cultural Unionist" Ulster Society and Ulster-Scots revival projects, presents the rising as reflecting specifically Scots-Presbyterian radicalism renewed in tenant-farmer and Independent Orange protest movements of the early twentieth century.[\(9\)](#)

Howe overlooks instances where contemporary defenders of Unionism come from Catholic/nationalist backgrounds (notably Rory Fitzpatrick, author of *God's Frontiersmen* (p.102) and many British and Irish Communist Organisation writers associated with the intellectually-eccentric Brendan Clifford (pp178-80), a secularist from a Southern Catholic rural background, who after advocating "two nations" theory and electoral integration reverted to a pro-republican viewpoint in the early 1990s.)[\(10\)](#)

These shortcomings reflect gaps in the literature. Much remains to be done; Howe rightly calls for Irish scholars to expand their comparative range, "inserting Irish history, including... its radical, socialist and feminist movements, into the myriad stories of the North Atlantic archipelago [J.G.A. Pocock's name for the former British Isles], of Europe, of the Atlantic world ...[into] a genuinely rather than rhetorically comparative colonial and postcolonial historiography" (p.145). He deserves commendation for addressing his subjects and readers as equals rather than mystified puppets or keepers of ineffable mysteries, and for sharpening the tools of our labours.

Notes

1. David A. Wilson *United Irishmen in the United States: Immigrant Radicals In The Early Republic* (Cornell University Press, 1998) pp133-40.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John Mitchel *Jail Journal* (New York, 1854).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. It ignores the linking by sections of the Tory Right of compromise in Northern Ireland with European union as threats to British sovereignty (e.g. Peter Hitchens *The Abolition of Britain* (London, 1999; rev.ed. 2000) pp331-2, 337, 358-62), though this has very restricted political leverage.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Tom Garvin 1922: *The Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin, 1996).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Mary Daly *The Buffer State: The Historical Roots of the Department of the Environment* (Dublin, 1997) pp297-320.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. James and Margaret Cousins *We Two Together* (Madras, 1950); Kumari Jayawardena *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Rule* (Routledge, New York, 1995); [Women's Marginal Role in Politics - Madhu Kishwar](#). [2][Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Brian Maye *Arthur Griffith* (Dublin, 1997); Patrick Maume *The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Political Life 1891-1918* (Dublin, 1999); *ibid.* "Arthur Griffith, Young Ireland, and Republican Ideology: The Question of Continuity" *Eire-Ireland* 34, 2.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. George O'Brien *Economic History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin & London, 1918) pp2-3, 304-5, 397-406.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. David Hume *To Right Some Things That We Thought Wrong... The Spirit of 1798 and Presbyterian Radicalism in Ulster* (Ulster Society, Lurgan, 1998).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Clifford has always seen Northern Ireland as an unviable political entity; having failed to secure its full integration into the UK he advocated integration into a modernised Irish Republic. His earlier work influenced later universalist, as distinct from particularist, theorisations of Ulster Unionism.[Back to \(10\)](#)

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